

A COLLECTION OF STONE IMPLEMENTS FROM THE DISTRICT
OF COLUMBIA.

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(With plates x-xiv.)

The collection of stone implements from the District of Columbia and its environs, which is herewith presented to the Smithsonian Institution as an addition to the donation of December 22, 1887, is the result of personal work in the field. It was not made with a premeditated donative intent, but has grown by degrees until the collector no longer feels justified in claiming or exercising the right of sole ownership therein. In the hands of the Institution it will not only be accessible to others who are interested in such matters, but will probably draw to it further contributions from the same area, and thus serve a better purpose than it possibly could in private possession.

The collection is fairly typical of the aboriginal work as it is now found in the fields of the District. The greater part of the large stone implements had found its way into public and private collections long before this one began, hence the number of polished implements now offered is comparatively small. Yet, while this is true, a sufficient number of these implements have been found to fairly exhibit the degree of skill attained by the Potomac Indian in this class of work.

A tribute here to the handicraft of this people is not misplaced. The material with which they wrought was the most obdurate and refractory of all substances found available to any considerable degree among the American Indians. Quartz, quartzite, and argillite for the greater part were used from necessity, no better material being within reach. The first two are very hard, and in the hand of the workman full of unpleasant surprises. A long, slender flake, such as might be easily driven off from a mass of flint or obsidian, could be but with great difficulty produced from the boulder or pebble of the Potomac gravels. The argillite, though softer, is not susceptible of receiving or retaining any high degree of finish. Notwithstanding these obstacles the material was treated with such patience, care, and skill, that the work of this region, not only in matters of utility but in points of finish compares favorably with that of any other.

In gathering these relics special care has been taken to preserve an accurate record of each addition to the collection, so that, if it were desired, every piece might be replaced in the very field from which it was obtained; and in order that the record and catalogue may be better understood and perpetuated, as against the ultimate result of the growth of the city and continued cultivation of the fields, a map has been prepared and is submitted herewith, whereon are marked the various fields from which the collection was made. The map will also serve to show the location of all Indian village sites and aboriginal workshops in the District, and from what part of each contributing village site the collection was gathered. Thus it will be seen by consulting the map (Plate X,) that the eastern shore of the Anacostia, or Eastern Branch of the Potomac, is dotted with wigwam-like marks to indicate a village site, while but three fields on the stream are marked from which relics have been taken; one at Anacostia marked A, and two at Bennings marked B and C. The village is old Nacotchtanke, which stretched along the whole eastern shore from the mouth of the stream up to Bladensburg. While many places along the eastern shore of the Anacostia, are equally rich in relics as the three indicated, the ease with which the latter are reached from the city accounts for their marked prominence in this collection.

Again, it will be noticed that a village site is laid down along the eastern bank of the Potomac, from a short distance above Georgetown to the Little Falls, while but two fields, D and E, are there marked as having contributed to the collection. In this case the other fields were not available to the collector, being either covered with a heavy sod, or so closely cultivated that no room was left for the antiquarian. A small village is marked on the Virginia shore of the Potomac, overlooking Chain Bridge and Little Falls; another at the foot of Anacostan Island, on the same side of the stream; and still another a little farther down, at the southern end of the Long Bridge (Namaraugh quena); one at the mouth of Four Mile Run; and one at Falls Church, on the same stream.

It should not be understood that any one of these sites or fields has been exhausted by the collector. The ground covered by the village sites has been but partially under search, and the search even where it has extended has not been prosecuted closely enough to appreciably diminish the amount of relics, except in the matter of large stone implements, such as would strike the attention of those cultivating the fields, and so find their own way into public and private collections. In fact, the amount of material that may yet be gathered from these village sites is only emphasized by the present collection, which in effect is substantially confined to the fields at Bennings.

With each plowing of the fields a fresh supply of relics is turned up for the collector, and how long this will hold good may be indicated in the following observation: The new bridge across the Anacostia at the

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MAP OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, SHOWING ANCIENT VILLAGE SITES, ETC.

eastern end of Pennsylvania avenue leads directly into one of the old camps of Nacotchtanke. In preparing the grade for the eastern approach to the bridge, the surface soil was removed from at least two acres of this camp. The field, a level sandy plain, was first plowed, the loose soil taken up and deposited on the grade, and the process repeated. Each time the shovel followed the plow nearly everything turned up by the latter was removed from the field. On one side of the field, however, the work was not carried out to include the full area first laid bare, but was confined within lesser limits, and, the same thing occurring again, two low terraces were formed, each but a little more than the depth of one plowing. Thus: the upper terrace is the original surface of the field, the next lower the result of the first plowing, and the foot of this terrace the result of the last plowing. The whole depth of the excavation at this point was a little over two feet. An examination showed that the upper terrace carried a large number of relics common to the locality, bits of worked quartz, quartzite, arrowheads, etc., the second an equal quantity of the same material, while the bottom, though in less degree, still furnished a considerable number of implements, fragments, and chips.

To illustrate the amount of material on the surface of the ground, attention is directed to Exhibit No. 146,563, a tray of 107 pieces picked up in two hours' work, April 20, 1888, from the field marked A: A polished ax, arrowheads, knives, scraps of pottery, etc.; all the odds and ends of the old village life.

In studying the distribution of stone implements in the District it should be remembered that an Indian village of the Potomac was not a compact assemblage of houses, but scattered dwellings along a water-course, with the intervening spaces usually under cultivation. In some instances, however, a cluster of houses might be found at such points as afforded more than the ordinary riparian advantages, but usually the dwellings were comparatively isolated. Again, the establishment of temporary hunting and fishing stations is to be taken into consideration. An examination of any cultivated field that lies along the Potomac or Anacostia will furnish more or less evidence of temporary occupation. The difference between these places and village sites is readily discernible in the character of the remains, as well as in the quantity. The former show flakes, and chips of stone, with here and there an implement of the knife and arrowhead type, while the latter, with its ever-present pottery, seems to have left its mark on every stone in the field. The wreck of an old village can never be mistaken for the camp-ground of a single season.

In addition to the implements found in the vicinity of villages and hunting camps, the occasional arrowhead lost in the chase, and the greater number spent in battle, should not be overlooked.

After an engagement with the Mannahocks, it is related by Capt. John Smith that "we contented Mosco (a friendly Moraughtacund) in

helping him to gather up their arrowes, which were an armefull, whereof he gloried not a little.”*

In passing over the fields of the district, the frequent occurrence of a few chips of quartz, or quartzite, at places which do not otherwise show any signs of occupation, calls to mind another statement by Smith concerning the readiness with which the Potomac Indian prepared an arrowhead for use.

His arrowhead he quickly maketh with a little bone, which he ever weareth at his bracer, of any splint of a stone or glasse in the forme of a hart; and these they glew to the end of their arrows.*

The term “arrowhead,” as generally used, is applied to an implement with a range of usefulness much wider than is suggested by the word itself. It is a conventionalism, descriptive as to form, but not as to use. Wherever a sharp, cutting edge or point is required, either as the tip of an arrow or the blade of a knife, the general form is the same. By its wedge-shaped butt, or barbed shank, the point is easily secured in place to serve the purpose of the hour.

In the evolution of the arrowhead, invention confined itself mainly to methods of hafting, and in this direction much ingenuity is displayed in the variations of shank and base. It may be said with truth that the arrowhead, considered in its use as a projectile, reached its perfection in the hands of primitive man, so far as form goes, and that only in the matter of material was the point of the English archer’s arrow superior to that of the American Indian.

That it was only after protracted use of the simpler forms that the perfected arrow point was secured, goes without argument, but that we can show the stages of this evolution is another and more doubtful matter.

The reason for this lies in the fact that the most highly finished arrowhead must of necessity pass through the ruder forms in the process of manufacture, so that if work on the modern arrowhead is suspended before the implement is finished, we have an archaic type of the same implement. The remains of an old village site will illustrate this statement. From the chipped pebble without definite form, to the rudely ovate point, and from that stage to the thin blade, all may be found mingled together. Here rudeness in form is no evidence of antiquity, it being but a necessary incident in the production of the implement in any age. Catalogue No. 146651, U. S. National Museum, a tray of eighteen quartz pieces, with flakes and chips, from the fields at Bennings, will serve as an illustration.

The course of any chipped implement, whether arrowhead or knife, from the rock in mass to completion is the same. At each stage of successive chippings the stone assumes the familiar forms which have often been mistaken for completed implements of a rude type and great

* Smith’s Works, vol. 2, p. 427, Arber’s ed.

* Ibid., vol. 1, p. 68.